

**DO THEY KNOW SOMETHING  
WE DON'T KNOW?**



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# The INQUIRER

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# The INQUIRER

THE UNITARIAN AND FREE CHRISTIAN PAPER

Established 1842

The Inquirer is the oldest

Nonconformist religious newspaper

**"To promote a free and inquiring religion through the worship of God and the celebration of life; the service of humanity and respect for all creation; and the upholding of the liberal Christian tradition."**

*From the Object passed at the  
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## Inquiring Words

*At the opening ceremony of the General Assembly meetings, 13 people spoke about how their Unitarian faith, and being part of this faith community, inspires them. What they said will run occasionally in this space.*

### UNITARIANISM

By Jill Hudson

Unitarianism, is my saviour

It is the church where I can taste a different flavour.

All my life I had sought for spiritual truth

To the days of middle age from when I was a youth

I explored many churches and was always told the same

But I could never play the blind obedience game,

Never bow to creeds and beliefs that don't ring true,

Not allowed to mention that I held a different view

So I set off on my lonely quest to find the truth again

And found the Unitarian Church – where I can use my brain

And where I can be free to reach my own conclusions

And not be forced to settle for some other faith's illusions

Fifteen years on I'm certain that I found the path that's right

And I'm glad to meet with others who have had the same insight

But what about those people, struggling in society

Who haven't found the treasure of religious liberty?

How can we share our fellowship? How can we spread the word?

This is the crux that bothers me – for if we are not heard

We cannot take LIFE's message to people near and far

We really need to advertise what Unitarians are

We're living now on yesteryear's fat – the legacy of the past

If we don't increase our numbers, our movement will not last

So I implore you, delegates, to yourselves this aim apply

Because otherwise our movement will eventually die

We are the ones with power and the responsibility

There's no one else can make us grow – only you and me.

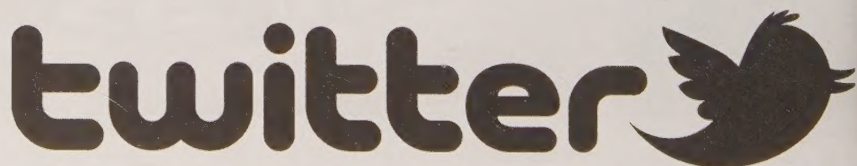
So let's make a pledge today – the focus of our lives

To ensure through our efforts Unitarianism thrives.

*– Jill Hudson is a Unitarian in the Midlands*

## Correction

The web address for the online Hibbert Trust lecture in the article by Matthew Smith in the 9 June Inquirer had an extra hyphen inserted in error. The correct address is: <http://go.podia.net/lindawoodhead>



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on Twitter. A little shot of Unitarian news and  
faith in 140 characters. <https://twitter.com/>



# Is this the 'End of Days'?

In his new book, **John Pickering** looks at the predictions of calamity in 2012 through the prism of his Unitarian dedication to reason.

According to shelf-loads of New Age authors and channellers, the winter solstice on 21 December 2012 marks the end of the "Mayan Calendar". For many New Age believers this is the apocalyptic date of "destiny". According to some, we live in the last great prophetic age, known by Christian Fundamentalists as the "End Times". In the New Age this is seen as a time of "Prophetic Convergence" when many prophetic and astrological events are believed to converge around the central axis of the Mayan calendar. Added to this are planetary alignments and channelled prophecies from higher spiritual beings, all of which it is claimed, coincide with a critical phase in the Galactic Creation Cycle. Not surprisingly some people are now looking, with either expectation or trepidation, towards the biggest cosmic event in history. Depending which 2012 scenario they have been convinced by, believers all over the Western world are busy getting ready for either global catastrophe or mass "Ascension" to some other level of reality by 21 December.

But what is the truth of all this?

One afternoon in October 2006 I walked into the speaker's room at a conference, I was greeted by these words: 'In 2012 everyone on this planet is going to die!'

Unexpectedly and tragically, half an hour later, the world literally ended for the bearer of these terrible tidings. He died that day. From then on I knew I had to discover why such an intelligent person had been so utterly convinced that the world was going to end in 2012.

I had been interested in Biblical prophecy since I was 14 when I discovered my Grandmother's old Bible with its fan-

tastic illustrations of all the strange creatures and many-headed beasts in Daniel and Revelation. By 2006 I was already working on a book about prophecy in general, and I now turned my attention to the question of 2012 and the "End of the Mayan Calendar".

To try to get some kind of rational perspective on all this I collected all the scholarly data I could find on the Maya: their beliefs, calendars and astronomy, and then began to compare all this with the most popular New Age beliefs and predictions about the 2012 prophetic deadline.

Whilst much of this turns out to be very silly, some of it is highly disturbing: more so because of all those who have been suckered in by the bogus prophetic proclamations for either global annihilation or spirit "Ascension". (Ascension being the New Age version of the Christian end-timers' idea of the Raptures)

For years, prophetic snake-oil salesmen have kept popping up with more reasons as to why we should believe them yet again, even in the face of a whole string of past prophetic failures. Some of you may remember Radio evangelist Harold Camping, who claimed the Raptures would happen on Saturday 21 May 2011 – at precisely 6pm. Of course it didn't happen.

And the next day Harold was unavailable for comment.

However, this recent Christian prophetic debacle is by no means unique.

Over the years the Doomsday business, just like drugs and prostitution, has attracted all kinds of predators, who have exploited the weak and vulnerable. Certainly, throughout history, there has been no shortage of the "false prophets" warned of in the Bible.

Many have claimed to know when the world will end, either clairvoyantly or by interpreting existing prophecies. So far, none of them have been right.

No major catastrophic events that have occurred, such as the Indonesian tsunami or last year's Japanese earthquake, have

*(Continued on next page)*



Mayan pyramid photo by S Elefant via Wikimedia Commons



# Why should we believe seers?

(Continued from previous page)

been documented as being supernaturally forewarned by anyone.

All such events have been largely unexpected.

Yet prophetic salesmen can sound very convincing and anyone who does not pay attention to reason and basic common sense is likely to get hoodwinked.

Sceptically: why should we believe such people, simply because they *claim* to have supernatural knowledge of the future? This alone does not make it the truth.

In assessing such claims we certainly need to look at the person's prophetic track record. One piece of good advice to help us to discern truth from lies is God's own test for prophets in Deuteronomy 18:22.

*"If the prophet speaks in the Lord's name but his prediction does not happen or come true, you will know that the Lord did not give that message."*

New Living Translation 2007

Nothing could be clearer; according to this verse, every self-styled prophet that gets it wrong is a "false prophet". End of story.

So what about 2012?

At first glance the 2012 Doomsday express looked in pristine condition: gleaming, well oiled and ready to roll. Its qualifications as a prophetic train of thought seem incontrovertible! Not only had the Earth-shaking information for this mega-global event been deciphered from ancient Mayan inscriptions and calendars, it had been written in the stars, confirmed by astrology: seen in visions and channelled from aliens and higher dimensional entities.

In New Age terms it seemed to tick all the right cosmic boxes – but it didn't.

Over the past few years researching the various prophetic claims on the 2012 bandwagon I discovered a whole baggage trail of New Age marketing hype: bogus predictions, astronomical misconceptions, and misinformation about the "Mayan Calendar" and eschatological events claimed to occur on the 2012 winter solstice. It seems that almost every previously failed Doomsday prediction had now been latched onto the so called "End of the Mayan Calendar", the latest prophetic date with the most hype behind it!

However, the present New Age take on 2012 does not seem to be authentic Mayan wisdom at all but a Westernised, hyped-up form of *Mayanism*, within which you will find a whole melting pot of apocalyptic notions including: the coming of Planet X/Nibiru, the return of Quetzalcoatl: Polar reversals, the rising of Atlantis, earthquakes, floods and general global catastrophe, as well as various fuzzy feel-good predictions for "Ascension" to a higher frequency (for the chosen), or some kind of mass spiritual evolution, or alien intervention, or even consciousness raising rays from the centre of the galaxy! As my Latin teacher was wont to say: "*caveat emptor!*" This is very good advice, especially when "pseudo-science" is trotted out to back it all up!

When it comes to prophetic claims and date setting, the buyer must indeed beware. Most of us at some time will have encountered earnest members of the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society, who have the distinction of consistently setting the most wrong dates for the end of the world – and yet, amazingly, people still believe them. Back in the 50s, Science

Fiction writer Eric Frank Russell, once wrote: "*Baloney Baffles Brains!*", and as with past prophetic fiascos, in the 2012 Doomsday package there is certainly a huge dollop of baloney mixed in with all the glittering ingredients.

In researching all the 2012 hype I was often reminded of the Great Advent Movement of the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Hundreds were convinced by William Miller's prophetic notion that Christ would return in October 1844, and putting all other concerns aside, prepared for the great day when they would be "caught up" to meet the Lord in the air – very much like the believers in 2012 Ascension are doing now. But unknown to those Adventists, ahead of them laid "The Great Disappointment". Christ did not come as predicted; the world did not end, or even change spiritually in any significant way. A similar scenario was replayed back in 1987 when many in the New Age bought into the idea of "*Harmonic Convergence*" a globally synchronized meditation, supposedly correlated with the "Mayan Calendar" and linked to an allegedly significant alignment of solar planets – which, astronomically, was a complete misconception. But at the time it was said these heavenly signs indicated a "major energy shift" was about to occur. It was to be a turning point in human consciousness powerful enough to change the world. Harmonic Convergence, it was claimed, "corresponded with a great shift in the earth's energy from warlike to peaceful." Many were convinced by this idea, including one of my own neighbours, and New Age author Shirley MacLaine, who enthusiastically referred to it as a "window of light."

But just like the Adventists' 1844 date, the day came and went with nothing of any cosmic significance happening. There was definitely no shift in "the earth's energy from warlike to peaceful." For in the following years came more wars: more corruption in governments and industry, the drastic increase of the AIDS Pandemic, 9-11 and the Gulf War. Going on the evidence of all the past prophetic failures it seems highly probable that the 2012 winter solstice date will also come and go with nothing of any cosmic significance happening.

The world will not end and there will be no mass "Ascension" to a higher level of reality. When nothing claimed by any of the 2012 prophets or channellers happens as predicted, then those who were suckered into believing such prophetic baloney will also have to go through their own time of "Great Disappointment".

It is both unwise and dangerous to pin our spiritual destiny as individuals on prophetic deadlines or on the words of those who have a vested interest in selling us their own apocalyptic constructs.

But one thing we can predict with a fair degree of certainty for 2012 is that 31 December 2012 will be promptly followed by 1 January 2013.

And, this is just a guess: a whole lot of people will be making New Year resolutions NOT to believe everything they read on the internet!

*John Pickering is a member of Kendal Unitarians. John's book, '2012: Prophetic Meltdown' is now available on Kindle at <http://www.amazon.co.uk/dp/B0084735VC> This will be followed later this year by, 'The Dooms Day Express': the truth about prophecy and prediction. To be published by O Books.*



# Ullet Road church celebrates first

Ullet Road Unitarian Church hosted the country's first civil partnership conducted on religious premises last month. The church received final confirmation from Liverpool City Council the week before the planned blessing of Kieran Bohan and Warren Hartley's relationship. That allowed them to sign the legal documents recognising their partnership after the service.

Kieran Bohan, 41, and Warren Hartley, 36, from Princes Park, who have been together for four-and-a-half years, have been involved in groups for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people of faith in Liverpool for several years.

Kieran is a member of Quest, the group for LGBT Catholics, and Warren co-ordinates a monthly Anglican Eucharist service for LGBT Christians Together. They coordinated Spectrum of Spirituality, the interfaith service for Liverpool Pride for the last two years. Kieran is originally from London but has lived in Liverpool for nine years. Warren's father was from Liverpool and emigrated to Australia in the 1960s. Warren,



Warren Hartley and Kieran Bohan sign the Schedule of Civil Partnership at Ullet Road Unitarian Church, Liverpool, in the first service of its kind on religious premises. They are accompanied by witnesses Camryn Hicks, Anne-Marie Martindale, Liverpool City Council registrar Janet Taubman and Unitarian lay minister Angela Howard. Photo by Simply Perfection [www.simplyperfection.co.uk](http://www.simplyperfection.co.uk)

## Global Chalice Lighting

The International Council of Unitarians and Universalists announces the 106th in its monthly series of global chalice lighting readings. Every month, a reading is distributed to Unitarian and Universalist congregations around the world. Each congregation is asked to use the reading for one worship service in the designated month, identifying it as the 'Global Chalice Lighting' for that month and naming the group which submitted it. It is hoped that the ICUU Global Chalice Lighting Project will enhance the worship experience in our congregations and raise awareness of the international dimensions of our religious movement. This Global Chalice Lighting is to be used during June 2012.

**We light our chalice of freedom, our  
Unitarian symbol,  
In the spirit of faith, hope and love.  
As we do so, we reflect for a moment, in  
this place of simple beauty,  
On the meaning of these three things in  
our lives.**

**And we think of those not here, blessed in  
the knowledge  
That the fond spirits of those whom we  
love well can never leave us,  
But stay in our hearts forever.**

**(silence)**

**And now come into this circle, this  
fellowship of holiness and health.  
Come and you shall know peace and joy.**

**-Judith Crompton  
British General Assembly of Unitarian and  
Free Christian Churches  
([www.unitarian.org.uk](http://www.unitarian.org.uk))**

born in Sydney, has lived in Liverpool for five-and-a-half years.

Kieran, who runs an LGBT youth group, said: "When we booked our blessing over a year ago we had no idea that this would be possible. We are delighted to have achieved this milestone on the road to equality."

The couple originally planned to go to the register office the day before the blessing service. Warren, who works as an administrator, explained: "Bringing the two elements together means we are able to integrate our sexuality and our spirituality, to celebrate our love for each other and our love of God."

Angela Howard, the lay minister at Ullet Road Church, said: "Many of our Unitarian churches have conducted blessings for same sex couples, either to complement a legal civil union or simply to affirm a relationship, for many years. We are so pleased to have the first civil partnership on religious premises, but we will continue striving for all couples to have equal access to civil marriages, religious marriages and civil partnerships."

Registrar Janet Taubman said: "I am delighted that the couple got what they wanted – a religious celebration and legal recognition." Around 150 people attended the service, which the couple had written themselves using resources from various Christian traditions for same sex blessings.

Plans to allow religious buildings to host civil ceremonies were announced in February 2011, but the legislation was only implemented in December 2011 following public consultation.

The first church to become licensed to conduct civil partnerships was Cross Street Unitarian Chapel, Manchester in March, which does not have a couple booked until the autumn.

See a news report about the Ullet Road ceremony here: <http://itv.co/MEwwyj>



# Is this what apostles thought?

By David Usher

The Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke all contain reference to what is known as The Great Commission, when Jesus charges his disciples to go in pairs out into the world to preach the new gospel, giving them authority to perform miracles of healing in his name. He warns them that they must not think of their own physical comfort, nor will not always be made welcome where they go, but he reassures them that through all travails they will be blessed for the work they do.

In a dramatic development which has been hailed by some scholars as the most significant for Biblical studies since the discovery of The Dead Sea Scrolls in 1947, previously lost fragments of Scripture have been discovered which cast new light on The Great Commission. They show that the disciples were rather less willing to accept Jesus' charge than had been thought. The fragments read as follows...

## First Chapter

But when the disciples heard these words of Jesus, and they thought of the discomfort and inconvenience to which they had been charged, they did appoint a delegation to go unto Jesus and offer their objections.

And the delegation did go to Jesus, and they did say unto him.

Lord, we like not what thou hast given us to do. For verily, the way you show us is full of hardship and sacrifice, and we think we are not fit for what they demandest of us. For lo, we are but 12, and the world is a large and hostile place.

And is it not so that the faith to which you called us is a faith of personal salvation? And we answered your call because we wanted the well-being of our own souls, and not because we wanted to be missionaries unto the world.

Let us instead meet in small circles where we may practise a faith of quietness and seclusion.

For verily, the smallness of our number is a true testament to our spiritual purity. Are we not above the unseemly scramble of the market-place. We would not wish to sully the holiness of our smallness by inviting in the unwashed and the unclean.

The fact that we are few makes us feel special. We do not want to spread your message to the unclean, Lord, lest we become less special in thy sight, and we lose the sense of intimacy with you that we hold so dear.

For truly we say unto thee, Master, that if we allow too many into our circle we will become corrupted by their presence, and the ways we love will be no more.

Therefore let us not make ourselves known. Let us not proclaim our healing message loudly to the world, but whisper it only to ourselves.

Let us hide ourselves away, and the reward for those who find us in spite of our hiddenness is that we shall allow only them to be part of our quiet number.

For it is surely so, that our smallness is the most true testament of our specialness.

## Second Chapter

And the Disciples did say further, Lord, it worrieth us that you are alienating people, when surely your message is one of being nice to our neighbours and not upsetting them. Do you not say that we must love our neighbour as ourselves?

Lord, we ask that you refrain from doing works of public charity. Prithee, do not again feed the hungry as you have done before. For we are told that to feed the hungry only encourages their idleness. We must exhort them to feed themselves, even though there is no food nor money with which to purchase. Lo, you did feed the many thousands that one time, and verily did many thousands come back a second time to be fed, and where is the end of it to be?

And lo, we have had word from the Federation of Kosher Bakers, protesting that we do take away their livelihood by creating loaves as if by miracle.

Likewise, your miracles of healing, Master, do cause resentment. For why should one be healed and not another?

If thou canst not heal all, or feed all, or clothe all, or comfort all, then surely it is better to heal or feed or clothe or comfort none, lest there be jealousy.

Master, we beg of thee, it is better not to do the work of justice and compassion at all. For such is not the true work of the spirit.

The work of the spirit is in quiet contemplation and the recitation of comforts for our own soul.

## Third Chapter

And Jesus did rebuke them, saying And did thou thinkest that the invitation was only unto thee, my first few?

Did thou thinkest that once thou was safely within the castle, thou might pull up the drawbridge against others who might enter?

As I extended the invitation to you that you might freely receive this liberating gospel, so must you extend it to others, for it is not for you alone but for all who would be glad to receive it.

If your heart has been gladdened by this gift of faith, dare you withhold it from another?

Your desire for comfort is no testament to the purity of your soul, but a witness against the hardness of your heart.

And the acts of kindness and compassion to the multitudes are not mere spectacles that people might gape and marvel.

They are the very core of faith, for without them, faith is but a withered vine of use to no-one.

Therefore, I command ye again, hide not your light beneath a bushel. Share the gift

(Continued on next page)



# James to sermonise for Unitarians

"I do hope Joseph Priestley had a sense of humour!" James Barry said releasing the subject of what he hopes will be the world's longest Unitarian Sermon. The 'preachathon' – as it has been called, is entitled 'A History of the Corruption of my Christianity' and plays on the name of the Priestley book that was such an influence in the formation of the non-conformist religious movement.

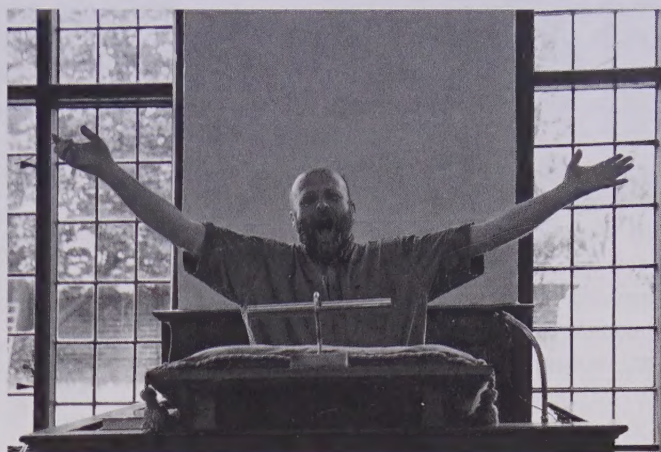
James, who has been a Unitarian for nearly 20 years, thinks it will be an easy record to break and he can't find anyone who has set one.

The sermon will start at 12 noon on Sunday 29 July at the Ditchling Unitarian Chapel. Anyone in the area will be most welcome to come and interrupt and throw questions from the floor for as long or as little as they like. Free refreshments are available for those who wish to witness this event in person, and people who log on will have the opportunity to ask questions or send messages of support through the online chat facility.

"I don't think setting irrelevant records is the sort of thing sensible people worry about," James continued. "But as this is purely for charity, common-sense and good taste are automatically banned! Realistically, I have absolutely no idea how long I can keep talking. Normally I get fed up with the sound of my own voice so I might bore myself to sleep. Who knows, I am certainly not going to do any practising! My first mile stone will be at 12 hours. Unless I can make that goal, I really don't feel I will have achieved anything."

The webcast will be shown live on [www.ukunitarians.org.uk/tv](http://www.ukunitarians.org.uk/tv) "I am not intending it to be serious at all, but if anyone has any questions they want to ask about us Unitarians, I hope they will send them to me on the chat facility we have on the web page. If I can't answer it, I am hoping that another Unitarian watching the broadcast will be able to. Most people don't know much about us, so it seems a good opportunity for anyone to ask anything. I will of course ban deep and serious or theological questions, this event is for fun!

The funds raised are going to three charities. The Unitarian National Youth Programme, for which James and his partner Lorna Hill are both leaders. 'Send a Child to Hucklow' the Unitarian Charity that gives under-privileged children a holiday in Derbyshire. Thirdly funds for Ditchling Unitarians who have the job of maintaining their 17th century listed



James Barry practising in the pulpit before his planned record-breaking sermon at Ditchling.

chapel.

James, a Unitarian since 1994, is very involved in the Unitarian movement nationally, he wrote their current 200-page web site and is part of a team that supports over 100 congregations maintain their local sites. He was a Unitarian district councillor for a few years, served on *The Inquirer's* board and is a leader for the National Youth Programme as well as a trustee for three churches. He worked as the General Assembly's IT consultant for nearly three years.

James' adventures – charitable and otherwise – include walking from Sussex to Cornwall then from Land's End to John O'Groat, lived in a chicken shed, been rescued three times by emergency services, was a Venture Scout leader, nearly killed himself half a dozen times rock climbing and the same number on motorcycles and once installed his own central heating system. Many of these stories will come out during his sermon.

This event is to help celebrate 350 years since the Great Ejection and 175 years of Unitarians being at the Ditchling Chapel. The 'Great Ejection' involved 2000 ministers being thrown out of the established church for not agreeing to follow the rules and was the beginning of the non-conformist religions in the UK of which Unitarianism is one.

For more information or to contribute see: [www.ukunitarians.org.uk/news/](http://www.ukunitarians.org.uk/news/)

## Gospel fragments reveal timid apostles

(Continued from previous page)

of your faith with all on the highway and in the market-place. Bless them that have their own faith, and wish them true joy in it, but deny not your faith to others who might be glad of it.

For those not willing to share faith are not worthy to keep it.

Those not willing to show compassion are not worthy to receive it.

Those not willing to speak the Word are not fit to hear it.

And the disciples were rebuked, and their contrition was real. And they did go out to the world, two by two as Jesus had commanded, and they did preach the new gospel of love to all who would hear it. And they did endure hardship, and some did spit upon them, but they also found many who rejoiced to hear this new word, and who did join the growing throng of

eager believers.

The discovery of this new fragment makes one wonder what might have happened to Christianity if the timidity of the disciples had prevailed. Might it have slowly withered away, with the ever-diminishing band convincing itself that its decline was not their fault, it was just a sign of the times, that anyway it was better to die than to do anything which might be uncomfortable or not be according to accepted norms, or even upset the neighbours?

*The Rev Dr David Usher is District Minister for Unitarians in London & the South East.*

*Dead Sea Scroll illustration of Book of Psalms (left) from US Library of Congress.*



# I took the road less travelled by

By Danny Crosby

A few weeks ago I was invited to lead worship at the chapel where I first discovered Unitarianism, Cross Street in Manchester. It was a life-changing event the day I chose to walk into Cross Street, a path I never dreamed I would tread. That day I felt completely connected to everything. I felt that life, the universe, that God, was speaking to me in and through all that I encountered; that everything was deep and rich in meaning. One of those special days, I'm sure that we've all had them.

After the service I bumped into a member of the Altrincham congregation Ann Molyneaux, who was at Cross Street to play with the Alberti piano group. I briefly said hello to Ann as we passed in the foyer and then I tootled off into Manchester to do a little shopping. I thought I'd treat myself, hey why not.

After an hour or so I decided it was time to go home and got on the tram in Piccadilly. A couple of stops later Ann got on the tram herself. I called out to her as she passed me and we sat and chatted for a while. It seems that Ann had been doing some shopping too. She held the poem "The Road Not Taken" by Robert Frost, in her hand.

"The Road Not Taken" truly is an everyman poem; it speaks such a universal truth. How often in life do we all meet that fork in the road and have to make a decision, often not an easy one, to walk down that road to who-knows-where? Of course for every road that we take, there is at least one other road that we do not take and I am sure that we all wonder, from time to time, where that road may well have led.

I visited my granddad the other day, it was his 89<sup>th</sup> birthday. It was a joy to sit and talk with him, if only for a short time. He talked about how we can never predict the future. How as a young man he and his best friend Percy had gone to sea together, to serve in the war. My granddad came back, but Percy did not. They both chose that same path, not that they had too much say in it, but only one of them carried on through this physical journey. My granddad has lived a long life and has experienced so much. He has made many decisions and I know for sure that he has made numerous mistakes. What was clear to me during the conversation was how much he respected the privilege and opportunity that his life has been, something denied to so many others. Life truly is the greatest gift of all, it is the ultimate grace. It is a privilege that we did nothing to deserve.

"The Road Not Taken" ends with the immortal words "I shall be telling this with a sigh somewhere ages and ages hence; two roads diverged in a wood, and I took the one less travelled by, and that has made



Danny Crosby

all the difference." It ends with this sense of not living with regret. It is about taking the path that will make all the difference; about taking the more challenging path. The path less taken is the one that will lead to the deep and meaningful life, but it won't be trouble free.

It brings to my mind the journey that the Israelites took to the "Promised Land". In Deuteronomy 30 vv 11-19 Moses speaks to the people on his 120<sup>th</sup> birthday. God had just informed him that he would not enter the Promised Land with the people he had led out of exile. The people gather round Moses to receive his final blessing. And what does he say? He tells them that they must "choose life." They are told that in order to keep the freedom that they have been given they must make thoughtful choices. I am sure that this must have been scary for them, for after all they were

frightened of their freedom. Throughout their time in exile whenever they were given freedom they did not want it, they hoped that someone would make their decisions for them. Again this is such a universal predicament, it echoes through the ages. How often do we wish that someone would make our decisions for us? Wouldn't that make life easier?

To wander down an uncertain path, the one rarely travelled down, does appear frightening. No doubt it will be uncomfortable and uneven and a little overgrown, there may be monsters hiding in the shadows. But should we avoid this path? Should we choose the easier softer way? By avoiding the path, that is still partially grassed over are we choosing life, or are we just making things harder than they need to be? Is it better to choose caution, to just let life happen to us rather than to choose the riskier path that forces us to engage with danger? I believe it is better to choose life, but to do so wisely and this requires discernment.

The word discernment is formed from the Latin word "discernere", which means to separate, to distinguish, to sort out. Just think of prospectors panning for gold or sifting through the rocks and dirt in search of gem stones. They are separating, they are sorting through the muck for what is precious, they are distinguishing, they are discerning.

Discernment is the key to making those wise choices. We need to discover what is of value and what needs to be discarded in our minds. We need to discard the dirt and muck to uncover the gold, the gems, to have clarity of thought, so that we can "choose life". This is not easy, especially when we think of all that information that swims around in our lives and our consciousness; information like an enormous shoal of fish swimming round

(Continued on next page)



The road less travelled can make all the difference. Safari 11 photo



# Everything I really need to know...

Some time ago I led a service where I used Robert Fulghum's creed from "Everything I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten." Fulghum is a Unitarian Universalist minister who writes out his creed every year. I urged the congregation to write not their own creed, which is a fairly straightforward business: 'Jesus was a man', etc. but to write down the principles by which they lived their lives – the tenets of their faith.

After much thought I came up with two, both from Sunday school teachers of mine in childhood:

- Be the best you can, do the best you can
- Always pay back money, always pass on a kindness.
- And a third, which was the motto of my first secondary school:

With good will doing service (from Ephesians 6.7, I learned later).

The first one took a bit of a knocking when I decided, age 17, to be a prison officer. The entire family came round to jump on my head but I countered all arguments until my uncle said: "Surely, Dorothy, these people have suffered enough." So I became a teacher and was much happier and, I hope, more effective. I worked very hard to be the best possible teacher I could be. I used to say to our new Year 5s that it was always exciting to meet the new intake as we didn't know who we'd got. 'One of you may be a future prime minister or may find the cure for cancer.' Then I would tell them about the street cleaner in Radcliffe who was so caring of and useful to and loved by his local community that when he retired a plaque was erected to commemorate his life and work. Better to be a happy, useful, loved street cleaner than a miserable, ineffective anything else.

The second one is definitely not well-known enough. It is almost impossible to do anything for some people without them straining every muscle to repay you. 'No, no, no. I don't need repaying,' I snarl. 'I am simply repaying a kindness done to me by someone who was repaying a kindness done to her. Did no one in your Sunday school ever tell you about the golden

## That made all the difference

*(Continued from previous page)*  
and round aimlessly in a small tank and not really going anywhere. Our lives, our heads are just so full of stuff. How do we discern what is healthy, what is right? Well we need silence; we need time away from all this information and all these things that pull us in so many directions. We need time to be still, time to be silent, time to connect to our bodies and our breathing; time to hear that still small voice of calm. A voice less than a whisper, but somehow more than silence; that voice that has spoken down the centuries, to those who had ears that could hear it; the voice that spoke to the people of Israel and said "I have set before you life and death, a blessing and a curse. Therefore choose life"

The choices we make matter. It matters what we are and what we do. I do not think that God chooses this for us. Yes God offers guidance, "The Lure of Divine Love" but it is up to us to choose the path that we follow. Often the most rewarding path is the one that is less worn and more over grown and perhaps seemingly more treacherous. Often it is the one that is less travelled by.

*The Rev Danny Crosby is minister at Altrincham and Urmston.*



chain?"

You can turn the third one round, if you can't do the service with good will then better not do it at all.

So why all this homespun wisdom? Well, yes, guv, you've got me bang to rights. I think you should do this, as a church/chapel/meeting house or as an individual. I think we need to spend more time thinking about the real tenets of our faith, the principles by which we do actually, genuinely live our lives. It can be a long and difficult process and throw up some surprises.

I mentioned some while ago the possibility of a little booklet on 'What it means to be a Unitarian'. If we can't organize ourselves to write the booklet I do think it would be a useful exercise if once a year, like Robert Fulghum, we all sat down and thought about our tenets of faith and whether we are living by them.

If you stop at 'If it was good enough for Flo and Jo, it's good enough for me' then you needn't bother reading this column, it will only irritate you.

*Dorothy Haughton is a worship leader in the Midlands.*

### Ministry Inquiry Day

**Want to know more about training as  
a Unitarian &  
Free Christian minister or lay pastor/  
leader  
and about working with our  
congregations?**

This summer the Ministry Strategy Group is again holding an Inquiry Day for people who are at an early stage of considering this possibility as well as for those who are almost ready to make an application for training.

**Manchester, Luther King House:  
Thursday 9th August  
11am for 11.30 start – 3.30pm finish**

**Booking deadline: 3rd August.**

### Advance booking is essential

*To book, please contact Mary-Jean Hennis at  
Unitarian General Assembly,  
Essex Hall, 1 – 6 Essex Street, London WC2R 3HY  
Phone: 020 7240 2384  
Email: [mhennis@unitarian.org.uk](mailto:mhennis@unitarian.org.uk)*



# Letters to the Editor

## Flower communion a ritual with meaning

To the Editor:

I have read several articles in the Unitarian press recently advocating a re-embracing of ritual in our worship, for the spiritual, sensual and psychological gifts it can bring to a gathered community. I concur with these sentiments and, for those communities who have not already discovered the delights of the Flower Communion, I wholeheartedly commend it to you, as a uniquely Unitarian ritual which can offer an abundance of the gifts mentioned above.

For some time I had read about Flower Communion, but it was not a tradition in any of the Unitarian congregations with which I had been associated, until I arrived in Bedford, Massachusetts where I took part in this ritual for the first time.

I recently offered a third annual Flower Communion to Unitarians in Edinburgh, and together we created a rich and beautiful celebration: of giving and receiving; of the blessings of diversity; and of devotion to building a better world. People arrived, bringing with them buttercups and bluebells, lilies-of-the-valley and peonies, roses and sweet williams, little potted



*Children helped celebrate the Flower Communion in Edinburgh.*

marigolds and michaelmas daisies. During the service the children helped, as people came forward to choose a flower to take away with them; and I told, again, the powerful story of Norbert Čapek, who devised the Flower Communion for his Unitarian congregation in Prague, in happier days before his arrest by the Gestapo, internment in Dachau, and ultimately his death in a Nazi 'euthanasia centre.'

If any congregation feels drawn to incorporating more ritual into their worship and has not yet discovered our Unitarian Flower Communion, please do explore the possibilities of this beautiful gift bequeathed to us by Norbert Čapek, an inspiring Unitarian prophet and martyr.

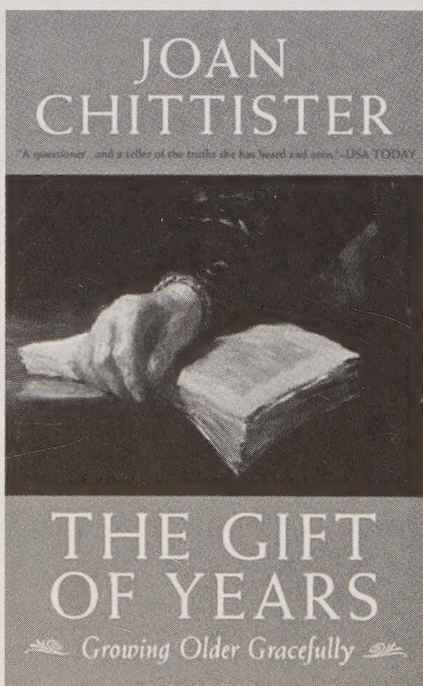
**The Rev Maud Robinson**  
Edinburgh Unitarians

### Don't panic if you don't remember names

To the Editor:

I am reading a life-changing book entitled "The Gift of Years" Growing old gracefully by Joan Chittister. I am certainly already old and I want everyone to read this book – especially those who worry about becoming old or being old. I have much resented the physical effects of being old; no more tennis, no more mountain climbing, small chance of learning to ride a surf board or gallop over the moors on a fine steed. And I have been lucky; not deaf or blind or unable to walk or so far as I know suffering dementia.

The book has very useful things to say about loss of memory; no need to panic over forgetting a name. Much younger people do that and it signifies nothing. DO READ THE BOOK.



**Brenda Knopf**  
Southampton

### Inquirer letters policy

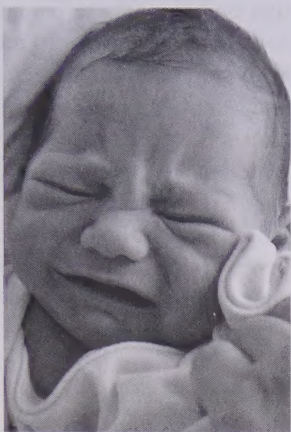
Letters should be succinct. It is preferable that they are sent by email to [inquirer@btinternet.com](mailto:inquirer@btinternet.com). Typewritten or legible handwritten submissions may be sent to the editor at 46A Newmarket Road, Cringleford, Norwich NR4 6UF.

Letters should be signed with the writer's full name and, if applicable, the name of the group or congregation with which the writer is affiliated. A postal address and telephone number are required, for verification purposes. Letters will be edited for length and content and may appear in an excerpted form. Any affiliations listed with letter writers' names are for identification purposes only, and should not suggest the view expressed is representative of that body.



# Transhumanism, a discipline for our times

Earlier this month, some researchers announced they have successfully mapped a foetus's DNA. It means that in the future, parents may be able to choose characteristics for their unborn children. Or, doctors could use gene therapy to prevent diseases, enhance intelligence or even athletic ability. **Tom Owen** reports on transhumanism, the philosophical discipline which covers the ethical side of the debate.



Transhumanism is a little known area of philosophy. Even amongst philosophers it is not mainstream, dealing as it does with concepts usually found in science fiction. So what is a transhumanist? Transhumanism at its core is the belief that the human body has gone as far as it can in terms of evolutionary development. Instead, transhumanists see it as a moral duty for man to take control of his own development by going beyond the confines of the body and they see technology as the route to achieving this goal.

By using new as well as existing technologies transhumanism forecasts that we will very soon be able to influence many different aspects of what it means to be a human being.

Areas where these efforts could be concentrated include the eradication of disease and disability, the increase of physical and cognitive capacities and the extension of life. To give an idea of how far this last belief extends some philosophers believe that the first people to live to 200 years old have already been born. A staggering thought. At first glance it is hard to disagree with these aims; You and I would both prefer it if the horrible suffering that cancer brings into people's lives did not exist, similarly I'm sure you'll agree that learning faster or being stronger would be wonderful.

Of course like all philosophical stances transhumanism has its opponents. The catchily named bioconservatives take the opinion that to meddle with the essentials of the human body is at best naive or hubristic and at worst extremely irresponsible. They point out that perhaps living for 200 years would not be as desirable as we might think, after the first 100 what else is there to do?

From a practical perspective there is also the problem of overpopulation, if everyone lived twice as long we would run out of space on the earth in a few generations. Suggestions by some transhumanists that a mandatory euthanasiation would solve this problem obviously leave a very bitter taste. The bioconservatives also point out that the introduction to

the market of self-enhancement technologies would bring about a division in class. Those who could afford the best enhancements might then go on to have the most successful careers. They would be able to afford more enhancements for their children and very soon we would see an uncrossable gulf opening between the enhanced and 'normal' humans. We need only read HG Wells' 'The Time Machine' and his portrayal of the Eloi and the Morlocks – two distinct species separately evolved from the human being – to see what such a gulf in society might create.

Wherever you come down on the issues surrounding transhumanism it is hard to disagree that it is a very real issue and that it must increasingly come to the fore of our moral debate. If we consider a medical technology we already have, like the hearing aid, and I asked you to say whether it was morally acceptable for a 60-year-old losing his hearing to use such a device I would hope that you would immediately say yes. But if I asked you whether hearing boosters, a technology that would increase the hearing of perfectly healthy people who were not going deaf, should be used the answer might not be quite as clear cut. One is therapy, the other is improvement. And this distinction is key to the debate. It is exciting to think that these technologies are around the corner but before we can use them it is time for all of us, not just the transhumanists and their bioconservatives pals, to decide whether it is safe to use them.

*Tom Owen is a philosophy graduate.  
Baby photo by Thier Aquino*

## Keys to Peace Creative Solutions to Conflict

Practical tools for supporting peace  
through the arts

July 13th – 23rd 2012 Norwich, Norfolk  
Eleven days of interconnected dance, voice and creative workshops, exploring how the arts can help in conflict situations, and seed inner and outer peace. The event is aimed at people and organisations working for peace-building, intercultural or multi-faith bridge-building and conflict transformation. The workshops will be of particular interest to community workers, inter-faith workers, facilitators for group conflict and peace workers

14th – 15th ~ T R I B E: Group identity, culture-clash and co-existence

17th – 19th ~ LIVE YOUR VISION: Renewal, integrating all aspects of life.

21st – 22nd ~ DANCING THROUGH WALLS: Move through conflict

Project co-ordinator: Stefan Freedman

**Workshops from £125.**

**Book for the whole event or individual workshops**

Details at  
[www.keystopeace.co.uk](http://www.keystopeace.co.uk)  
[www.worlddance.org](http://www.worlddance.org)





# Fab times ahead



Three sizzling youth events are coming up summer 2012 – for all ages...

## **Bridging Weekend - Life Skills: how to survive work, life and the universe**

This will include interview skills, drama and cooking. A weekend for 16-21 year olds. Friday 29 June – Sunday 1 July at Flagg Barn, Derbyshire. Cost is only £35.

## **Unikids - Carry On Camping**

A Unitarian holiday for 7-14 year olds led by the Youth Programme. Wednesday 25 – Saturday 28 July. Explore Canterbury with us and join us for games, circle time and a whole lot of fun. Two nights in Canterbury Youth Hostel, followed by a 24 hour camp craft experience in woods near Canterbury. (led by [www.natural-pathways.co.uk](http://www.natural-pathways.co.uk)) Includes shelter building, fire building and nature awareness. Free transport from London. Only £110 – fully inclusive.

## **Five Days Away (FDA) - Making a 'Me Manual'**

How to look after ourselves with gentleness. A holiday for 12-17 year olds. Monday 6 – Friday 10 August at the Nightingale Centre. Join us for creativity, fun, trips out, discussions and time to make new friends. Cost £125.

All events are run by the Youth Programme – all super value owing to generous grants.

Contact John Harley for further details at [jharley@unitarian.org.uk](mailto:jharley@unitarian.org.uk) or look at events on the website [www.unitarian.org.uk](http://www.unitarian.org.uk). Please book soon to avoid disappointment – there are only a limited number of places available. Photos by (above) Liz Hills and (below) James Barry.



## Jump into the 'Sea of Faith'

At the recent GA meeting, David Arthur of Wakefield, a long-standing member of the Sea of Faith network, remarked to me that he believed the Unitarian tradition to be the ideal "spiritual home" for Sea of Faith members seeking to be part of a faith community. The Sea of Faith Network aims to promote and celebrate religion as a human creation. Its membership includes people from all faith traditions and none. Members are united in a common belief in this purpose but, like Unitarians, they have widely differing perspectives. Each year the Sea of Faith Network holds a National Conference.

From 13-15 July the Network is holding its 25<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference entitled "Worth and Work" at the University of Leicester. The two main speakers are Femi Obyebode, Professor of Psychiatry at Birmingham University, and Harriet Bradley, Professor of Psychology at Bristol University.

Don Cupitt, whose ground-breaking 1984 TV Series "The Sea of Faith" was the spark that moved the movement into life, will as always be contributing his perspective to the debate.

In addition to the main speakers, there will be workshops on a range of topics related to the conference theme, as well as a specially written play and a plenary debate on the relative value we attach to different types of occupation.

If you are already familiar with the Sea of Faith Network, or even a member, I hope you will think about coming to the Conference. If this is the first you have heard of the Network, what better way of finding out more?

For more information about the Sea of Faith Network, and to obtain a Conference Booking form, visit the Sea of Faith website: [www.sofn.org.uk](http://www.sofn.org.uk)

– Carol Palfrey

## Harris Manchester College Oxford

## ANNUAL MEETING OF FRIENDS and HONORARY GOVERNORS

Tuesday 26<sup>th</sup> June 2012

12 noon Reception

12.30pm Lunch

2.00pm AGM

3.00pm Lecture

"Martineau's Hymns", Alan Ruston  
4.00pm Tea

5.00pm Valedictory Service for  
Sheena Gabriel and Jim Corrigan

Please inform the Bursary if you wish to attend the lunch: 01865 271006, or email [conferences@hmc.ox.ac.uk](mailto:conferences@hmc.ox.ac.uk)